

Marin County Courthouse
Fourth Street, Between A & Court Sts.
San Rafael
Marin County
California

HABS No. CA-1955

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PHOTOGRAPHS
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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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THE MARIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE

HABS No. CA-1955

San Rafael, Marin County, California

Address: North side of Fourth Street,
Between "A" and Court Streets

Latitude: 38°00' North
Longitude: 122°00' West

Occupant: Vacant

Use: 1873 to 1969; County Courthouse

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

With the longest recorded history of any California county, dating from Cabrillo's visit in 1542 and that of Captain Francis Drake in 1579, Marin's historic sites and structures have suffered more through the ravages of time, fire and destruction than those of any other section of the State. The old County Courthouse in San Rafael remains one of the few existing buildings linking the present with the County's heritage of the past.

In 1817 Mission San Rafael Arcangel was founded in a sheltered and secluded spot fifteen miles north of the Golden Gate. It was established as an asistencia of Mission San Francisco Asis (Mission Dolores) to care for victims of a pestilence that had broken out among the converts of that Mission. With the secularization of the missions in 1834, San Rafael Arcangel became the property of the Mexican government and was sold at public auction in 1845.

Marin County was incorporated on February 18, 1850, at a time when a bitter fight was being waged in Congress over a bill to admit California as a state, President Taylor and a majority of the Democratic Party favoring retention of the territorial status. The bill was finally passed at a third reading but by no means unanimously; there being 150 ayes to 56 noes. President Taylor died on July 9th and the then Vice-President, Millard Fillmore, succeeded to the Presidency. Fortunately, Fillmore favored the inclusion of California and, when the bill went to him, he approved and signed it on September 9, 1850; California becoming the 31st State with Marin one of the original 27 Counties, and San Rafael the County Seat. The first reference to it as such is in Meret's Chronology where, in 1851, San Rafael is referred to as the "County Seat". As the County has grown in population and development, Marin, in common with many of the other California Counties, has undergone various changes in political subdivisions, townships, school districts etc. but San Rafael has always remained the seat of County government.

The need for a County Building and lock-up had been met in 1851 by converting one of the old mission buildings into a "juzgado" (Hoose-gow) for this purpose, and so it was used until 1853. In that latter year the courts were transferred to an adobe, built and formerly owned by Timothy Murphy, a pioneer settler in the county, and there they were held for the next twenty years.

The old Murphy adobe was located on the southeast corner of "C" and Fourth Streets, two blocks west of the Old Courthouse site. It had been purchased from the Murphy estate in 1853 by one Timothy Mahon for the sum of \$1,000 and sold by Mahon to the County in 1856 for \$5,000. There are early accounts in the Board of Supervisors' records concerning alterations and additions to the adobe for its conversion to court and jail purposes including the expenditures of \$100 for the building of a privy and an additional \$25 for white-washing same.

Various uncertain and poorly scheduled ferry systems had operated between San Francisco and Marin County since 1853, but it was not until the Saucelito Land & Ferry Company established a regularly scheduled, daily service by steam ferries in 1868 that the settlement of the County began a radical transition from almost entirely ranching and farming to the establishment of planned residential communities. The rapid increase in population created a demand for facilities for the proper conduct of the county's public business.

As early as 1863 there had been agitation throughout the County for a new Courthouse as the old Murphy adobe, practically reduced to a mud-pile, had become entirely inadequate for the County's office needs. These needs were met in 1872 by a successful bond issue that made possible the construction of a new Courthouse and Jail.

Pursuant to an act of the State Legislature approved January 18, 1872, providing for the building of a "Court House and Jail in Marin County" the 1856 site, measuring 95'-9" by 131'-0", was sold at auction on December 19, 1872 the proceeds of which, together with the bond issue were used for the purchase of the "A" and Fourth Street site and the construction of the new Courthouse.

The bond sale was held on March 26, 1872, the successful bidders being Woods & Freeborn with a bid of \$59,250; the site selected by the Board of Supervisors having been the block in San Rafael bounded by "A" and Court, 4th and 5th Streets. This site was conveyed to the County on April 9, 1872 by H. M. Heuston for the consideration of \$12,000.

A notice "To Architects" advised them in the San Francisco Daily Bulletin on March 29, 1872 that "the Board of Supervisors invites the submission of plans, specifications and estimates for the construction of a new COUNTY COURT HOUSE with a Jail underneath - the cost not to exceed the sum of Fifty Thousand Dollars. The Board reserves the right to reject any and all plans offered; but will pay a PREMIUM OF TWO HUNDRED DOLLARS in U. S. gold coin for such as it may select for adoption."

Submission of proposals was made on April 8, 1872 by the following architects: Wolf & Son; William Ball; Kenitzer & Raun; L. R. Townsend; A. C. Bugbee; James Gosling; J. J. Newsom and Knight & Sanders.

The architectural contract was awarded on April 10, 1872 to the firm of Kenitzer & Raun to prepare plans for a two story and basement brick structure to house Courts, County offices and Jail. Their plans as submitted on April 8th must have been substantially complete for on April 13th the Board of Supervisors advertised for construction bids which were received from the following contractors:

Charles Murphy	\$56,500
Charles Green	56,000
Sims & Harris	53,924
A. G. Fitzpatrick	51,475
M. Miles & Co.	51,000

Although A. G. Fitzpatrick was not the low bidder, he was awarded the construction contract together with his associate, John Cox, (both of San Francisco) on June 5, 1872 for the revised sum of \$51,000.

Both architects, Henry Kenitzer and Edward T. Raun were early arrivals in California; Kenitzer from Baden, Germany in 1854, first finding employment with the pioneer Sacramento architect, David Farquarson, in that city. Kenitzer was undoubtedly influenced in his later planning of the Marin County Courthouse by Farquarson's earlier design for the Sacramento County Courthouse of 1854; both buildings being of classic detail, that of Sacramento Ionic, and Marin being Corinthian; both of two stories with columned, pedimented portico on a raised podium reached by monumental steps spanning the entire front facade. The door and window fenestrations were framed with moulded casings, crowned with pedimented head mouldings. The exterior brick walls being plastered and scored off to simulate masonry.

Edward T. Raun arrived in California in 1849. Before associating with Kenitzer he was in partnership with John B. Taylor. In 1871 the firm of Raun and Taylor had designed the Charles Crocker mansion on California Street in San Francisco.

The Marin County Courthouse of 1872-73 and the U. S. Branch Mint in San Francisco of 1869-1874 were perhaps the last two major public buildings of the Greek Revival style to be built in California; both being excellent examples of the later phase of that period. With the possible exception of the Mono and Mariposa County Courthouses it remains the last of California's original Early American Period county buildings.

By August 3, 1872, the work on the Marin County Courthouse had progressed enough for laying of the corner-stone, the ceremony having been conducted by Marin Lodge No. 191, F. & A. M., and construction continued until completion.

The ceremony attending the laying of the corner-stone was accompanied by much "pomp & circumstance". The San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin of August 5, 1872, considered it of sufficient significance to have a "special correspondent" on the scene and his report, including the oration of the Hon. John W. Dwinelle in toto, occupied the front page.

Various alterations and additions have been made over the years but the center portion with its portico and wood, fluted columns, remains as originally built, with the exception of the domed cupola which was removed in 1928.

In 1905 a Hall of Records Wing was added to the east and north sides and in 1942 a similar wing was added to the west side; both wings carrying out the architectural details of the original cornice and window fenestrations. In 1952 interior alterations were made which did not effect the exterior. A semi-detached addition of contemporary design was added in 1957 to the eastern portion of the site.

With the construction of the new Marin County Civic Center, the last work of Frank Lloyd Wright, three miles north of San Rafael, the activities of the old Courthouse have been transferred to the new center, the last office being moved there in 1969.

Marin County (February 18, 1850) is almost seven months older than the State of California (September 9, 1850) and San Rafael has been the County Seat (1850) four years longer than Sacramento has been the State Capitol (1854). The Marin County Courthouse (1873) is actually a year older than the State Capitol Building in Sacramento (1874).

In addition to its architectural importance as a "period piece" the Marin County Courthouse has housed the offices of county government for almost a century, has been the scene of all court cases and actions of the Board of Supervisors and various Commissions that have influenced the economic growth, social and political fortunes of a county whose population has increased from 2,000 in 1872 to over 200,000 in 1970.

REFERENCES

TO BOOKS, RECORDS, AND OTHER AUTHORITIES

- a) Official Marin County Records
- b) "Chronological History of Marin County"; George Irwin
- c) "Alta California"; 1872; 1873 (San Francisco)
- d) "San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin" 1872; 1873
[See August 5, 1872 edition for dedication speeches]
- e) "Marin County Journal" 1872; 1873 (San Rafael) 1877; 1893
- f) "Independent Journal" 1949; 1968 (San Rafael)
- g) "California's Architectural Heritage"; Harold Kirker; 1960
- h) San Francisco Directories 1871; 1872; 1873; 1905
- i) "Times Wondrous Changes"; Joseph A. Baird; Cal. Hist. Soc., 1962
- j) "Tamal Land"; Helen Bingham; 1905
- k) California Board of Architectural Registration.
- l) "Marin County History"; Alley, Bowen & Co., 1880
- m) "San Rafael Illustrated"; W.W.Elliott & Co., 1884

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